

“To Each His Own?”

I once heard a preacher jokingly suggest that his life would be a whole lot easier if everyone in the congregation who thought he should never talk about politics from the pulpit would attend the first service, while everyone who wanted him to talk about politics from the pulpit attend the second. He was joking of course and said as much, but there is truth in it. People generally fall into two camps with regard to discussions of politics in the community of faith, and, at first glance it would seem that a good solution would be to allow those two camps to camp separately. But I can't help but wonder what happens when you only have one service???

In general I don't discuss politics in the context of the community of faith, but this is not because I do not have opinions or support particular positions. And it is certainly not because I believe that faith and politics have nothing to do with one another. Quite the opposite! My reasons are mainly pastoral. Some of you are already starting to squirm in your seat. Even the mention of the word politics from the pulpit puts you on guard. I understand that. Our whole culture of political discourse is such that two rational, well-intentioned individuals cannot simply disagree. One must not only be wrong, but have sinister motives. In such a context, once we identify someone's position or affiliation, we interpret almost everything else they say through a caricatured filter. We constantly wonder about the sincerity of their motivation.

And so I acknowledge that I am taking a bit of a risk in even bringing up this topic, but I want to make sure that my lack of political talk from the pulpit is not

taken to mean that I believe the two have nothing to do with one another. One pastor I know puts it well, “while a preacher has no right to tell you how to vote, he or she has a duty to encourage you to vote your conscious and to engage yourself in all efforts to make this world a better place.” To say that politics and faith have nothing to do with one another is to try to compartmentalize our lives in a way that is not productive or healthy. Moreover, it denies that our faith is an incarnate, impactful and lived out faith. MLK Jr. put it well when he said, “A religion true to its nature must also be concerned about social conditions....Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of people and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.”

But we are still in the bind that the one pastor joked about when he suggested all who are of one mind attend one service, while all of the other attend a second. Martin Marty describes it well: “While the committed often lack civility, the civil often lack commitment. The real challenge is to have committed civility. We must learn how to engage in that high level discourse, to treat other people as having value even when we seriously disagree with them. That’s the challenge. We need to state our convictions honestly and listen to each other genuinely.”

Our Presbyterian heritage, which precedes and in large part inspired our U.S. form of government, has much to offer in this regard. It is part of our constitution as Presbyterians to fully expect that people of good conscience will disagree. And much of the rest of our polity is about how we honor our differences and stay together. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes, “The rule for the community of Christ’s people has to be unity only in diversity, not unity in uniformity...The acceptance of other

people in their difference and their particularity...makes the Christian community...a healing community in this uniform society of ours.” Unfortunately, we tend to reflect more of our culture in this area of our life together than we do our faith.

But this is not a new problem. The truth is this is an issue that the Christian community has been struggling with from the beginning. And it’s one of the major issues Paul addresses in his letter to the church in Rome, the political capital of the world at the time. Members of the church in Rome are caught up in quarreling over opinions. Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who’s in and who’s out?

The first thing we need to notice about Paul’s letter to the Romans is that he never picks a side, rather he comments on the situation as a whole in terms of their faith in Christ. He does this by reminding them of what unites them despite their differences. First, they are all members of God’s household and as such none are in position to condemn or pass judgment on another. Second, even if they differ in their methods, they are all working toward a common goal, the building up of community to honor God. Bickering over their differences does not help them accomplish that goal. And finally, Paul reminds us that we are all accountable to God, and as one commentator puts it, “all of us will one day stand before the throne of grace, and on that day the question will not be: Was your theology perfect? Did you point out the sins of others? Did you win the debate? Instead, God will ask us: Did you love? Did you forgive? Did you encourage? Did you build up the body? Did you help others serve God?” (Christian Century, Living by the Word).

In his letter to the Roman’s Paul refutes a rigid individualism: a “to each his own philosophy.” He challenges us to think of community as that place where

differences are honored without separating into camps. Paul reminds us that it is those very places where our differences are most apparent God uses to deepen our faith and bind us more closely together in Christ's body. For it is in those spots of potential friction and disagreement that we have an opportunity to forgive and be forgiven, where we are both gently corrected and affirmed, where we realize that what unites us is not our uniformity, but something larger.

Any leader worth his or her salt will tell you that what unites a group is a commonly held mission or purpose. If a group lacks clarity of purpose, uniformity is the only thing it has to unite around. However, if the members of a group all have a common understanding of a purpose that unites them, they are much more apt to work through their differences. And when that happens, the individual members are given a chance to be challenged and to grow. Otherwise, they will remain the same, sure that they are right and anyone who disagrees with them is not only wrong, but has no value whatsoever to offer. And when that becomes our position, how sad for us: for we cut ourselves off from the chance to learn and grow, from the opportunity to be connected with something that is bigger than us!

“What distinguishes you from a Rotary Club?” a bishop asked a congregation that had become weak after several bad experiences with pastors. He was trying to start a conversation about mission and purpose, but his question stumped his listeners. Friends, until we can agree on an answer to that question for ourselves, I fear that we will depend on our uniformity to unite us. I worry that until we can articulate what the larger mission that unites us in our diversity we will not be able to fully honor all the wonderful, varied gifts each member and friend brings to our community; that we will not be able to grow and allow ourselves to be challenged to

new insights and experiences; that we will not be fully be able to love, forgive, encourage, build one another up and help each other serve God. And how sad that will be for us!

But the good news, the good news and the challenge and opportunity we have before us is to define what it is that unites us in our diversity, where we can state our convictions honestly and listen to one another genuinely, where we can accept others in their difference and particularity, and understand the value that each and every member brings to the whole group. William Sloan Coffin writes, "A church is a place where we try to think, speak, and act in God's way, not in the way of the fear filled world. A church is a home for love, a home for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity, to rest and be healed, to let their defenses go and be free...Church is where all hearts are one so that nothing else has to be one. Church is where there's such a climate of acceptance that each of us can be his or her unique self."

Friends, this is the challenge and opportunity before us at Roland Park Presbyterian: not to be a sanctuary for a few, but to be a church for all, the body of Christ in the world, right here at 4801 Roland Avenue!